

The making of ageing-in-place

Citation for published version (APA):

van Hees, S. V. (2017). *The making of ageing-in-place: Perspectives on a Dutch social policy towards lifecycle-robust neighbourhoods*. [Doctoral Thesis, Maastricht University]. Maastricht University. <https://doi.org/10.26481/dis.20171219svh>

Document status and date:

Published: 01/01/2017

DOI:

[10.26481/dis.20171219svh](https://doi.org/10.26481/dis.20171219svh)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Please check the document version of this publication:

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Valorisation

‘Research process and public policymaking are often distinct and asynchronous processes’, Lavis (2006) argues in his work on knowledge translation processes. We experienced this while doing our fieldwork. Rather than using a predetermined research protocol our research approach was based on an open design; our findings determined what was needed next. During recurring presentations of our research plans and preliminary findings, policymakers, directors, professionals and other participants in the audience almost always commented: ‘That’s all well, but, what do we gain from this? How will this benefit our daily practice?’

This valorisation chapter aims to add to the findings presented and discussed throughout this thesis. On the following pages an elaboration follows on three different elements that relate to the valorisation of this study: firstly, an overview is given of the different activities that took place during the study to disseminate our findings and to valorise our knowledge. Secondly, future directions for further valorisation are described. Finally, a reflection is added on the meaning of our valorisation efforts and on the meaning of doing an ethnographic inspired research ‘in the wild’, aiming to answer the questions introduced above.

1. Valorising while doing

As the introductory sentences of this chapter already illustrated, the valorisation of this study was organised largely parallel to the research activities on which this thesis draws. Given that we followed a social policy in practice, investigating different perspectives on this policy while it was being developed and implemented, it was crucial for us to be able to study those elements that were raised as meaningful by our participants. By following a policy in practice, the study itself was inscribed with a certain societal relevance that needed to be unravelled.

Firstly, we organised *feedback rounds* on a regular basis during our fieldwork period. The study presented in this thesis was conducted using a social-constructivist approach, in which perspectives were explored on how a social policy towards ageing-in-place worked out in practice. Different meanings of some major elements (such as citizenship and a new professionalism) within this policy were demonstrated. Most presentations were organised as feedback activities for participants within the social policy we studied. Preliminary findings were presented to participants, often concluding with one or more statements to ignite further discussion, always with an opportunity for feedback and questions. Occasions during which these presentations were organised include: meetings of steering committees, workings groups, project groups and case management meetings. The idea behind sharing our findings with the participants in the policy process we studied, was that they would be able to benefit while the study was ongoing from what we found. Thereby we explained that by demonstrating our findings we aimed to offer participants a mirror, based on which they could choose to adjust or change directions. We explicitly did not aim to come up

with specific directions about what they should be doing, nor did we confirm or deny that what they were doing was the best way to do things. We aimed to valorise our findings not only by continually feeding back our findings, but also by asking for feedback on our findings and suggestions for our research process. As the main researcher, I wrote several blogs for a webpage used exclusively by participants in this policy. I shared some of the insights and activities during this trajectory, asked for feedback and introduced future plans. Furthermore, a group of representatives of older adults followed me during the first phase of this study, to get insights in the developments of the policy in practice while simultaneously offering me advice, feedback and suggestions. Thereby we aimed to increase the relevance for older adults of the study in progress.

A second approach for valorisation was thus by *configuring* our *research design* during the process. We chose our definite research activities and topics based on what we found during our study. For instance, we found that many policymakers, directors, civil servants and managers expressed how they expected that professionals would make a difference in translating the policy to practice, by contributing to a participatory society and the ageing-in-place ideal. Subsequently, we organised focus groups and observations to explore the meaning of this 'new professionalism' for these professionals. Throughout the study, several focus groups with different themes were organised following this idea. We also held a workshop about participation during a meeting for professionals, civil servants, managers, directors, policymakers and older people (and their representatives) and arranged a photovoice project. Of all these activities (short) reports were sent to participants for further feedback and confirmation. The photovoice project - on which we reported elaborately in Chapter 5 of this thesis - was specifically set up with the aim to facilitate a dialogue between those involved in the policy process, and older adults who were affected by the policy. During our study, we found tensions between the ageing-in-place policy and the experiences of older adults in practice. But we also found how older adults experienced difficulties or constraints to share their experiences while being interviewed or during focus groups. Therefore, we looked for another method that could be helpful for people to share their perspectives and their experiences of place. Photovoice proofed to be a valuable method for this effort. In addition to older adults to participate in a photovoice project, we also invited professionals working in the neighbourhoods where these adults live. Doing so, we aimed to spark a conversation between policy and practice, including a dialogue on older adults lived experiences. Although we might not have bridged this policy-practice gap, photovoice helped to illuminate differences between policy and experiences in practices and enabled a dialogue between professionals and older adults.

Findings of this study were further *disseminated* for a broader professional and scientific audience. Presentations and discussions of the different parts of this study took place during several national and international conferences, seminars and workshops. Insights were used as input for educational and training activities. Lastly, dissemination took place by sharing our findings in national and international papers, as well as within this thesis.

Photographs of a selection of the valorisation activities during this study



2. Continuing the valorisation process

Despite our efforts to share and draw on our findings during our trajectory, some work can be done to increase the relevance of this thesis. Firstly, further investigation and development of methodologies to give voice to older people is needed. In this thesis, several methods (interviews, observations, focus groups, photovoice) were used to explore the perspectives of older people and the meanings of ageing-in-place for them. We demonstrated how each method helps to unravel new meanings. Confirming the value accredited to these methods by policymakers and other scholars may require testing in a more diverse sample size in order to consider different perspectives. Advancement of the method used, an exploration of the usability of other methods and a comparison that clearly demonstrates the differences between the separate methods will help to advance our efforts to give voice to how older people give meaning (to ageing-in-place in this dissertation).

In my assignment as a postdoctoral researcher at the department Tranzo, at Tilburg University, I explore new ways to investigate how to give voice to older people in a meaningful way. My assignment aims to realise a structure that enables older people (including older people receiving intramural care) to participate fully as well as meaningful in the Academic Collaborative Centre of Older Adults. The Centre is a network of scholars and healthcare organisations devoted to conducting applied studies related to care and welfare. In this assignment, the first author draws on ideas of this thesis, but also extends the meaning of this thesis by including older people in

residential care settings. Secondly, the development of a training to use such methods for policymakers, professionals and older adults can help to enable more dialogue between policy and practice. In this way, tensions created by different meanings of policy in practice can be explored collaboratively. A manual to use photovoice, and in addition the support of an independent scholar, offering reflections while participating, can be helpful in practice for municipalities who aim to explore policy-practice differences and tensions. Thirdly, to advance the scientific meaning of this study and more broadly, of our knowledge of ageing-in-place and of ageing-in-place technologies, an exchange with other scholars is indispensable. A concrete way of sharing and advancing this knowledge takes places within the Socio-Gerontechnology Network. Lastly, further translations of our findings for popular professional Dutch journals could be made to increase knowledge about this study.

A continuation of the valorisation process is important, as this study demonstrated how policy largely draws on assumptions of old age based on the idea that old age is only a phase with an increasing need for care and other help to remain independent and participative. The experiences of older people shared in this thesis show that there are many older people who live independently and have different needs and expectations than inscribed in current activation and ageing-in-place policies. To increase our insights in the perspectives of a broader group of older adults, and create awareness in policy about the different experiences of different people, further research is necessary. Joyce, Peine, Neven and Kohlbacher (2016) call these assumptions a negative rhetoric, based on which ‘policymakers, companies, researchers, and lobby groups around the world commonly suggest that aging will lead to a global crisis for health-care systems, for pension schemes, for the innovative capacity of economies, and for the social relations between age groups’ (p. 915). Encouraging policymakers (as well as companies, researchers and lobby groups) to include the experiences of all older adults in designing new age-friendly futures, requires us to continue unravelling how assumptions on ageing affect policies and their practices. Older people in particular should be given the means to learn about and articulate their ideals on policy.

3. Reflecting on meanings of valorisation

Downey and Zuiderent Jerak state in their chapter on Making and Doing in the recently updated Handbook of Science and Technology Studies: ‘In order for STS (Science and Technology Studies) claims to become relevant for others beyond the field, STS scholars must build the elements necessary for those claims to travel into new settings and gain position and status within them. Such elements pertain to what STS scholars judge to be the key analytical issues at stake, as well as to the concrete activities they undertake to address those issues within the settings’ (2016: p. 226). This statement could also apply for this thesis more broadly. Not only the question what STS is for is relevant and needs to be taken in mind when conducting

an STS-inspired research. The widely-held debate about the meaning of science that has been held during the past few years in the Netherlands demonstrates the importance of thinking about how our work is meaningful, as well as about the ways we can pursue to demonstrate the meaningfulness and relevance of our work for society.

In a position paper entitled 'Why Science Does Not Work as It Should And What To Do about It' by Dijstelbloem, Huisman, Miedema and Mijnhardt (2013) and several discussion papers, such as a paper about The Academic Manifesto by Halffman and Radder (2015), the meanings of science in and for society have been discussed. These papers question a culture of accountability within academia through 'measurement, increased competition, efficiency, 'excellence', and misconceived economic salvation' (Halffman and Radder 2015). The fact that a valorisation addendum is obligatory since 2014 at Maastricht University, and the upcoming debate on the recent appointment of a new president of the VSNU (Association of universities in the Netherlands), demonstrates a need to further define what Dutch science is for. It demonstrates how (Dutch) scholars are afraid science will be redesigned as a business, solely based on economic and short-term societal relevance. But also, that a need for further clarification of the role of science in society is experienced, as (social) scientists do affect and interact with both policy and practice. Bos (2016), for instance, in her dissertation showed how science policies affect the societal goals scientists embed in their research. She argues that scientists use big words like healthcare or sustainability to emphasise the societal relevance of their work.

The reason these events and movements are mentioned here, is that especially in applied social science, expectations are often that society will benefit from it on a relatively short term. Policymakers, organisations' directors and lobbyists are involved in applications for research funds, expecting it to be relevant eventually. An interaction and involvement between science and society which is necessary to enable research to take place in practice, but that also comes with responsibilities to maintain scientific impact as well.

As, social scientists, we should be aware of our scientific value and impact, and of the different meanings participants in our research give to our work. The aim of the study underlying this thesis was to investigate a policy in practice to be able to learn from this process. By sharing findings and planning research activities we wanted to be of benefit for current practices. However, it was never the aim to steer or strictly guide practice, or to draw conclusions on whether specific current practices were right or wrong. By sharing our reflections, we wanted to inspire participants to reflect on their practice. Simultaneously, as we asked participants in this process to invest some time in our research activities, it was helpful in conducting research activities when participant considered our study relevant.

It was never the intention of our study to delay any of the processes we were exploring. However, as the main investigator, I did find how some participants had quite high expectations of our study. At the start of this trajectory, some participants shared how they expected the university to guide them through this policy process

in some way. They hoped for innovative insights on which they could draw, or a confirmation that they were right on track, that what they were doing was right. This demonstrates how scholars are accredited with agency (in a variety of ways) in the policies and practices they study. As scholars, we need to be aware since this affects the practices we study as well as how we can perform our jobs. It raises questions about to what extent we are accountable for our research activities on the one hand, and eventually for the interpretation of our findings on the other. Although we did always emphasise that it was not our intention nor position to explain how things should be done better, we aimed to facilitate the process by sharing our findings and reflections, inviting participants to reflect on these as well. We explained how it was the responsibility of the audience to decide on whether and how to use and translate these insights for their own benefit.

By reiterating the nuance of our activities and outcomes, and that we did not aim to 'steer' in practice, we intended to explicate our position as researchers. However, in practice we experienced different ideas about the role of research in this process. During an introductory presentation in the steering committee, the research approach and some preliminary findings were presented. While discussing the preliminary findings one of the directors commented: 'Listen, we can presume everything has been calculated very carefully, that they have scored these assumptions, they have added and subtracted, and that what is presented renders those things that have been said. So, we need to do something with this.' During another meeting, when we discussed how our study could be of benefit to improve current practices, a director elaborated on how he 'did not really had something' with research, meaning that he had limited interest in research. In other interviews participants shared how they were frustrated or annoyed by their friendly competing colleagues who wanted to wait for research findings before acting, who wanted to follow research. However, these participants explained that it would not benefit practice if they kept waiting and waiting for research outcomes. Some participants emphasised how they deemed it to be of high value that a professor (supervising the study on which this thesis draws) attended the steering committee meetings. These expectations demonstrate how the presence of scholars in practice, affects the practice they study. While some thought research findings and recommendations should be followed, others argued research should follow practice and might not even be of actual relevance for them. Either way, this leaves a question of how to deal with such assumptions about research, and more specifically, to what extent scholars are accountable for translating their knowledge.

This thesis emphasises the importance of experiential, place-bound, situated knowledge. The expertise of older adults living in their neighbourhoods and professionals who experience how policy affects their daily practices should be used more often and regularly to improve social policies. It is up to us as scholars to help unravel how policy works out in practice, to offer reflections on policy in practice (solicited and unsolicited) and to facilitate dialogues where needed. How social policies work

out in practice is situated, each place and its context is different, inhabitants have individual and situated perspectives that affect the translation of policy. Therefore, we should not aim for a singular recipe for ageing-in-place or a blueprint for lifecycle-robust neighbourhoods. While insights and experiences at other places can be helpful to inspire new policies, policymakers also should be aware they act in unique environments.

The best way to find out how a new policy can be developed and adjusted to the needs and characteristics of their neighbourhood, is by initiating open and sincere dialogues with inhabitants. Not (or not only) by organising a consultation or participation evening, but by experimenting with ways to truly involve all kinds of inhabitants and by searching for people's perspectives by giving them voice, by finding ways that capture the voices of a more diverse group of older adults. Not only people who are already actively involved as representatives or politicians, but also people who remain yet unheard. As social scientists, we should pursue to explore their unheard stories and facilitate dialogues in our research. Simultaneously, to increase our impact and the value of our work, we should also remain sharing how we 'make and do' to enable further developments of knowledge on ageing-in-place and a mutual knowledge-translation between science, policy and practice.

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